THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
The Search for the Sacred
June 18, 2000

John M. Buchanan

"Faith is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a "thing" that you either have or you don't. The relentlessly cheerful and positive language about faith that I associate with the strong-arm tactics of evangelism fails to take ambiguity into account. I appreciate much more the wisdom of novelist Doris Betts's assertion that faith is 'not synonymous with certainty ... but is a decision to keep your eyes open.'"

Kathleen Norris
Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE SEARCH FOR THE SACRED
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Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-17
"Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus . . .He came to Jesus by night . . ." (John 3:1-2)

One of the wonderful perks of this job, serving a congregation which includes in its number so many brokers, bankers and business people, is that I can save myself the cost of a *Wall Street Journal* subscription. I have been a subscriber on and off—a businessman friend in Columbus, Ohio gave me my first subscription to provide a better "ideological balance," he used to say, with a twinkle in his eye. But now I find that many of you clip and fax or mail the articles and editorials you think I need to read—which I do, faithfully. Please don't stop, by the way. I love it and it is helpful.

And so it is that several people sent me the item from the Wednesday edition of the Journal last week which began with this wonderful question: "Why go to the gym, when you can go to church?" Under the headline, "Live Long and Prosper," the Journal reported on a new study by the National Institute for Healthcare Research that found a statistically significant link between church going and life span. You are 29% more likely to live longer if you're a churchgoer than if you sleep late on Sundays. Nobody's quite sure why it is, but scientists have known for some time that there are measurable positive physical benefits to going to church. Whatever that reason, that's what I call a really useful bit of information, although I'm not sure any of us ought to cut back on physical exercise and trips to the gym.

In any event, the study and the Journal article were reminders that the purpose of this enterprise is life, a full, joyful, exuberant, lusty life. Or as the Fourth Gospel puts it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life (The Greek word for "perish: also means "become lost"—so it's a matter of being lost, not punishment). Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16,17)

". . . not to condemn the world . . ." You wouldn't know that from a lot that you read about religion elsewhere in the newspapers last week. The Southern Baptists made the front page several times, resolving to keep women out of pastoral roles and condemning a lot of things, continuing a boycott of Disney and declaring that only people who think like they do will be saved. In fact, sometimes it seems that the purpose of the enterprise is to assure believers that they are right—and safe—and that everyone else is wrong and going to hell. In her description of her conversion and coming to faith, Anne Lamott remembers being at the absolute bottom, with nothing working in her life—disastrous relationships, drugs, alcohol—finally going to talk to an Episcopal priest, prepared to be criticized and condemned and being taken aback when he didn't do that at all, but actually listened to her. She writes: "He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren't."

"What did it mean to be saved," she asked, knowing that the word smacked of Elmer Gantry? And the wise priest responded, "I guess it's like discovering you're on the shelf of a pawnbroker, dusty and forgotten and not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, 'I'll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again.'"

And she did—said 'Yes' to her life. Said 'yes' to God and God's love for her. It didn't happen over night but slowly she came back to life. The next step involved going to church, very tentatively at first. Her search was slow, deliberate, tentative, skeptical, characterized by honest doubts, asking all the right questions, patience about not always having the answers, and finally resulting in her new awareness of God and God's unconditional love for her. (*Traveling Mercies,* p.42-44)

"God so loved the world that He sent His only son. Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world." (John 3:16-17)

Those words are from the account, in the Fourth Gospel, of one of the most famous searchers for the sacred, a man by the name of Nicodemus.

An important man about town, a Pharisee, a leader in the community, a member of the Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism, Nicodemus was prominent, respected and secure. The scholars remind us that the author of the Fourth Gospel uses a lot of symbolism and the fact that Nicodemus waits till after dark to come to see Jesus, may be symbolic language meaning that in the darkness of human history, Jesus is the light of the world, and, in fact, there is a lot of light and darkness in the Gospel of John. But it may also simply mean that Nicodemus did not want to be seen, that it would not be prudent for this prominent man to be observed talking with Jesus, the humble rabbi from Nazareth, in broad daylight.

I rather prefer that explanation. I think Nicodemus is looking for something he does not have. He is searching for the sacred, looking for his life.

Jesus tells him he needs to be renewed, recreated, reformed, reborn, or born from above. Nicodemus, it turns out, is not very good at metaphor, is the first fundamentalist, actually—takes the words literally and wonders out loud about the process of entering his mother's womb a second time. How in the world was he supposed to do that, Frederick Buechner asks, when he can barely get into a taxi cab under his own power.

In any event, he asks and Jesus' answer is such an enigmatic, meandering non-answer that the limits of language to describe and define the most profound human experience are becoming clear.

The wind, after all, Jesus goes on—wind—spirit—same word in Greek, blows where it will. You can hear it, feel it, but you can't see it. You don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So the mystery of God's activity, God's spirit, is not predictable, not controllable.

What you are searching for, Nicodemus, is God, transcendent mysterious God, God not confined to human reason, religious rules or even the best theology you can generate, the God about whom the Psalmist wrote:

> "The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
> the God of glory thunders . . .

The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, . .
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl . . ." (Psalm 29)

The God about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote:

> **"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his garment filled the temple . . . and the house filled with smoke, and I said, 'Woe is me!" (Isaiah 6: 1-5)**

What you are searching for, Nicodemus, is some sense of God—some sense that there is somebody out there who is not encompassed and circumscribed by human words, God mysterious and transcendent, God bigger and more real than anyone's description or creed or religion or theology or church.

In the recent edition of *The Christian Century,* there is an excerpt from a recent book written by Howard Mumma, a retired Methodist minister, who describes a series of conversations he had with the very famous and distinguished French existentialist author, Albert Camus. Mumma served the American church in Paris in the 1950's and he remembers noticing a man in a dark suit surrounded by admirers. It was Camus, a hero to the French after the war, an existentialist who had learned from Jean Paul Sartre that human beings are alone in the universe, that the immediate moment, the immediate experience, is all there is and all any of us may ever hope for. Camus had come to hear Marcel Dupre play the organ, but then he began to stay, to listen and eventually struck up a friendship with Mumma that resulted in conversations about faith and religion.

There were always rumors that Camus was actually a sympathizer, if not a Christian believer. Mumma recalls him saying during a conversation one evening:

"The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing . . . I am searching for something the world is not giving me."

He went on, according to Mumma, "I have been thinking a great deal about the transcendent, something that is other than this world."

Camus knew the Bible; knew that major Biblical characters, Jonah, Moses, Isaiah, were not confident, self-assured believers, but unsure, questioning, seekers. Jonah and Moses did not seem to want to believe. Both resisted responding to God's call. Isaiah was virtually paralyzed by his experience of God. But it was Nicodemus who most intrigued Camus and with whom he identified—"a wise man of Israel, seeking something he did not have."

Camus asked the same question Nicodemus asked, Anne Lamott asked—What does it mean to be born again, to be saved? Mumma's answer was a good one "To me to be born again is to enter anew or afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to receive forgiveness. It is to wipe the slate clean. You are ready to move ahead, to commit yourself to a new life, a new spiritual pilgrimage." Camus, Mumma reports, looked at him with tears in his eyes and said, 'Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to!" (*The Christian Century,* "Conversations with Camus," June 7-14,2000)

Camus died in a car accident shortly after all this happened.

But I was and am intrigued by his search and its similarity to the story of Nicodemus and Anne Lamott—for you and me, for that matter.

Douglas John Hall has written that modern men and women are on four quests; the quest for moral authenticity, the quest for meaningful community, the quest for meaning and purpose, and the quest for mystery and transcendence. People in the West following the violence and devastation and genocide of the 20th century are newly conscious of what human beings are capable of when they become convinced that they are alone in the universe and accountable to no one else. And so, says Hall, there's a new and earnest search for some sense of transcendence and meaning. (*The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity,* p.61)

It is not simply certainty. It is not religious simplicity. It is surely not exclusiveness which assures me that I am saved and everyone else is wrong and going to hell. He came not to condemn the world.

It is an open-minded, open hearted, receptivity to mystery, transcendence—the acknowledgement that there is a reality greater than us, greater even than our ability to comprehend. God, God transcendent, and mysterious, and holy—to whom we are accountable. God is God precisely in our inability to comprehend and get it all pinned down, finally, ultimately, absolutely.

James Carse writes about the mystery of a "ragged line of wild geese in the gray November sky and the certain knowledge that no one knows exactly what they are doing there." Carse says, "the mind does not come alive until it meets what it cannot comprehend." (See *Daybook,* Autumn 1999, from "The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience," p. 29-31)

That's what got Nicodemus and Albert Camus and Anne Lamott. The mystery—the transcendence—the reality of God which we mean when we use the term Holy Spirit.
That and the astonishing assertion that the mysterious transcendent reality behind all reality—loves us, wants us, wills full and joyful life for us, loves us with a love from which nothing can ever separate us, a love in which we are never completely lost.

God so loved the world—and that, I gladly confess, continues to startle me and astonish me and sustain me. That God should love you and me.
That God sent Jesus, not to condemn me, you, but to free us for full and exuberant and joyful life.

How can this be, Nicodemus asked, and we echo—How can this be?

The great British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, after a life of skepticism,
became a believer when he saw God's unconditional love for the world in Mother Teresa's love for the homeless and dying on the streets of Calcutta. Muggeridge wrote later:

'It sounds crazy, as it did to Nicodemus who asked how it was possible to be born again. Yet it happens: it has happened innumerable times. Suddenly caught up in the wonder of God's love flooding the universe, made aware of the stupendous creativity that animates all life—every color brighter, every shape more shapely, every meaning clearer, every note more musical, above all, every human face, all human companionship, recognizably a family affair—all irradiated with the same new glory in the eyes of the newly born." *(Christ and the Media,* p.74,75)

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes—believes the reality of a transcendent God, believes and receives and lives in the reality of God's unconditional love—shall not be lost—but have life everlasting.

So, do entertain this morning the notion that the spirit of God is moving in your life, asking questions, raising issues, nudging, pushing, prodding. And do entertain the notion that God wants you to live as fully as you are able. And do consider the proposal that God loves you—loves the world—and that saying yes to that love can save your life.

Thanks be to God.

Prayers of the People

Trinity Sunday

Holy… Holy… Holy… Lord our God - our words seek to grasp your majesty, that we might praise you to the limits of our ability… and for that we believe we need words:

Holy are you, God our maker,
Holy are you, Christ our savior,
Holy are you, Spirit our comforter.

Holy are you, O Lord, whose unity is expressed in community - the community of three, which yet speaks to us of the indivisible One.

And so we come to the limits of our vocabulary. Try as we might, the thanksgivings of our mouths touch only the surface of the unspoken praise of our hearts. For it is not in language that we can express our thanks,

but in our awe and wonderment at your astonishing Creation,
in the peace we know from your saving and redeeming grace,
thanksgiving, when we offer your gift of justice and love to a world crying out for the holiness of liberation.

Then we see O Lord, that the nature of your holiness is not a complex doctrine to be grasped;
not a set of philosophical categories devised by the clever,
but is your indwelling in the hearts of all whose lives reflect mercy, peace, justice and love.

So hear our prayers Holy Lord,
prayers for mercy where the world is unkind - in lands which know hunger and famine; in this country where ignorance and fear lead to prejudice; in this city where poverty of opportunity imprisons people in cycles of hopelessness.

Hear our prayers for peace, Holy Lord,
peace in the lives of nations which would see weapons turned into welcome signs;
and, in the hearts of those who mourn, that peace which passes our understanding.

Hear our prayers for justice, Holy Lord,
that where inhumanity and oppression is drying up the seed bed of fullness of life;
where greed and exploitation parch the development of community life,
in these places justice will flow like a river, bringing new life and wholeness for all.

And hear our prayers of love Holy Lord,
as we remember those whom we love the most, families, friends, neighbors, colleagues.
Be close to them and keep us close with them, that in learning to love them we may be empowered to share that love in ever widening circles.
And in that spirit let us remember those we once loved but who have now gone before us into the glory of your abiding presence. Keep us in communion with them until we come together at the last in the Father's house, the family of God complete, through Jesus Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And let us together pray in the words Jesus taught his friends to say: